Journal Title: Communication research

Volume: 3
Issue: 1
Month/Year: 1976
Pages: 3-21

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Article Title: A Dependency Model of Mass-
Media Effects

Imprint: LOCAL dtdiscovery (Via SFX)

It is suggested that one of the reasons that there is such a lack of clarity as to whether the media have effects is that researchers have proceeded from the wrong theoretical conceptualizations to study the wrong questions. The dependency model of media effects is presented as a theoretical alternative in which the nature of the tripartite audience-media-society relationship is assumed to most directly determine many of the effects that the media have on people and society. The present paper focuses upon audience dependency on media information resources as a key interactive condition for alteration of audience beliefs, behavior, or feelings as a result of mass communicated information. Audience dependency is said to be high in societies in which the media serve many central information functions and in periods of rapid social change or pervasive social conflict. The dependency model is further elaborated and illustrated by examination of several cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects which may be readily analyzed and researched from this theoretical framework.

A DEPENDENCY MODEL OF MASS-MEDIA EFFECTS

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Do mass communications have widespread effects on individuals and society or do they have relatively little influence? It seems almost incredible that after many decades of theorizing and empirical study, media researchers are still typically unable to give a straightforward answer to this question. While the "hypodermic needle" theory was abandoned long ago by communications researchers, the public continues to feel that the media have direct, usually menacing, effects on their audiences. The scientific community, on the other hand, almost reluctantly leaves the issue of direct or "magic bullet" effects open because hundreds of studies have failed to support such a conceptualization.

Research on communication is guided mainly by adaptations or elaborations of learning theories that have emerged from

psychological laboratories and animal studies. To a limited extent, sociological theories stressing such concepts as "diffusion" and "primary groups" have also played a role in the development of communications theory. But the search for the effects of the media has been guided primarily by conceptualizations that focus on the stimulus-response probabilities of individuals acting in a situational field. One generalization that can be drawn from detailed reviews of such literature (Weiss, 1969) is that audiences frequently encounter media messages about which they have preestablished beliefs and norms that are anchored in their group associations and that filter or recreate media messages to conform to the established social realities of the audience. While such generalizations are helpful in understanding the psychological and social processes which act as constraints on media influence, the conceptualizations on which they are based may not be the best guides for studying a complex social process such as mass communication.

It can be suggested that one of the reasons that there is such a lack of clarity as to whether or not the media have effects is that researchers have proceeded from the wrong theoretical conceptualizations to study the wrong questions. A more appropriate theoretical framework for the analysis of media effects originates in the classical sociological literature ranging from Durkheim (1933) to Marx (1961) to Mead (1934). Such literature, while not directly focused on the issue of media effects, encourages treatment of both the media and its audiences as integral parts of a larger social system. Peoples' social realities are regarded as not only a product of their social histories and current systems of symbolic interaction, but also as being fundamentally connected to the structural conditions of the society in which they live. As the social structure becomes more complex, people have less and less contact with the social system as a whole. In other words, they begin to be less aware of what is going on in their society beyond their own position in the structure. The mass media enter as not only economic systems engaged in deliberate attempts to persuade and entertain, but also as information systems vitally involved

in maintenance, change, and conflict processes at the societal as well as the group and individual levels of social action.[1]

Thus, if one hopes to account for changes in the cognitive, affective, or behavioral aspects of people's social realities brought about by mass communicated information, one must take into account the interrelationships between audiences, media, and society. It is not sufficient to attempt to account for media alteration effects solely in terms of the audiences's psychological characteristics, prior socialization, on-going groups associations, or their social characteristics.

Mass communication, in other words, involves complex relationships between large sets of interacting variables that are only crudely designated by the terms "media," "audiences," and "society." It is through taking these sets of variables into account individually, interactively, and systematically that a more adequate understanding of mass communications effects can be gained. By taking this theoretical orientation, the present paper presents a theoretical approach toward the issue of media influences that identifies a number of observable effects of mass communications on individuals, groups, and society. The conceptualization stresses as a central issue the *dependency* of audiences on media information resources—a dependency that leads to modifications in both personal and social processes.

A DEPENDENCY MODEL OF MASS MEDIA EFFECTS

We propose that it is the nature of the tripartite audience-media-society relationship which most directly determines many of the effects that the media have on people and society. While there are a number of aspects of audience-media-society relationships that could be discussed, the one we focus upon first is the high level of dependence of audiences on mass media information resources in urban-industrial societies. The primary reason for this focus is that the degree of audience dependence on media information is a key variable in understanding when and why media messages alter audience beliefs, feelings, or behavior.

Dependency is defined as a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party. So defined, dependency on media information resources is an ubiquitous condition in modern society. One finds this condition in many settings, ranging from the need to find the best buys at the supermarket to more general or pervasive needs such as obtaining the kinds of information that will help to maintain a sense of connectedness and familiarity with the social world outside one's neighborhood. There are numerous ways in which people are dependent on media to satisfy information needs. For example, one form of dependency is based on the need to understand one's social world; another type of dependency arises from the need to act meaningfully and effectively in that world; still a third type of dependency is based on the need for fantasy-escape from daily problems and tensions. The greater the need and consequently the stronger the dependency in such matters, the greater the likelihood that the information supplied will alter various forms of audience cognitions, feelings, and behavior.

It can be assumed that as societies grow more complex, and as the quality of media technology improves, the media continuously take on more and more *unique information functions*.[2] These include information gathering, processing, and delivery. In the American society, for example, the media are presumed to have several unique functions. They operate as a Fourth estate gathering and delivering information about the actions of government; they serve as the primary signalling system in case of emergencies; they constitute the principle source of the ordinary citizen's conceptions of national and world events; they provide enormous amounts of entertainment information for fantasy-escape.

Some media information functions are more socially central than others. In other words, some are more essential than others for societal and individual well-being. Centrality may vary over time, situation, and unit of analysis. For example, providing national sports coverage to politically active groups is probably

a less central function than providing them with information about national economic or political decisions that strongly affect their lives, while the reverse may hold for politically apathetic groups. It can be hypothesized that the greater the number and centrality of the specific information—delivery functions served by a medium, the greater the audience and societal dependency on that medium.

The second condition in which dependency is heightened occurs when a relatively high degree of change *and* conflict is present in a society. Forces operating to maintain the structural stability of a society coexist with forces toward conflict and change. The relative distribution of forces for stability or for change varies over time and place. Societies undergoing modernization, for example, usually experience high levels of conflict until societal adaptations are made that promote new forms of structural stability. Social conflict and social change usually involve challenges to established institutions, beliefs, or practices. When such challenges are effective, established social arrangements become, to one degree or another, inadequate as frameworks with which members of a society can cope with their life situations. People's dependence on media information resources is intensified during such periods. This is a joint consequence of the reduced adequacy of their established social arrangements and the media's capacity to acquire and transmit information that facilitates reconstruction of arrangements. We can hypothesize, therefore, that in societies with developed media systems, audience dependency on media information increases as the level of structural conflict and change increases.

These basic propositions of dependency theory can be brought together and summarized as follows: The potential for mass media messages to achieve a broad range of cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects will be increased when media systems serve many unique, and central information functions. That potential will be further increased when there is a high degree of structural instability in the society due to conflict and change. We need to add, however, the idea that altering audience cognitive, affective and behavioral conditions can feed back in turn to alter both society and the media. This is what

was meant by a tripartite relationship between media, audience and society. Herein lies a key theoretical difference between the present dependency approach and the "uses and gratifications" approach of Blumler and Katz (1974). Proponents of the uses and gratification approach examine how audiences use the media to gratify similar information needs but do so by taking the audience as the focal point of analysis, not the interrelationships between audience, media, and society.

We can now illustrate how dependency theory predicts certain types of effects. The general relationships are presented in diagrammatic form in Figure 1. We now turn to identify
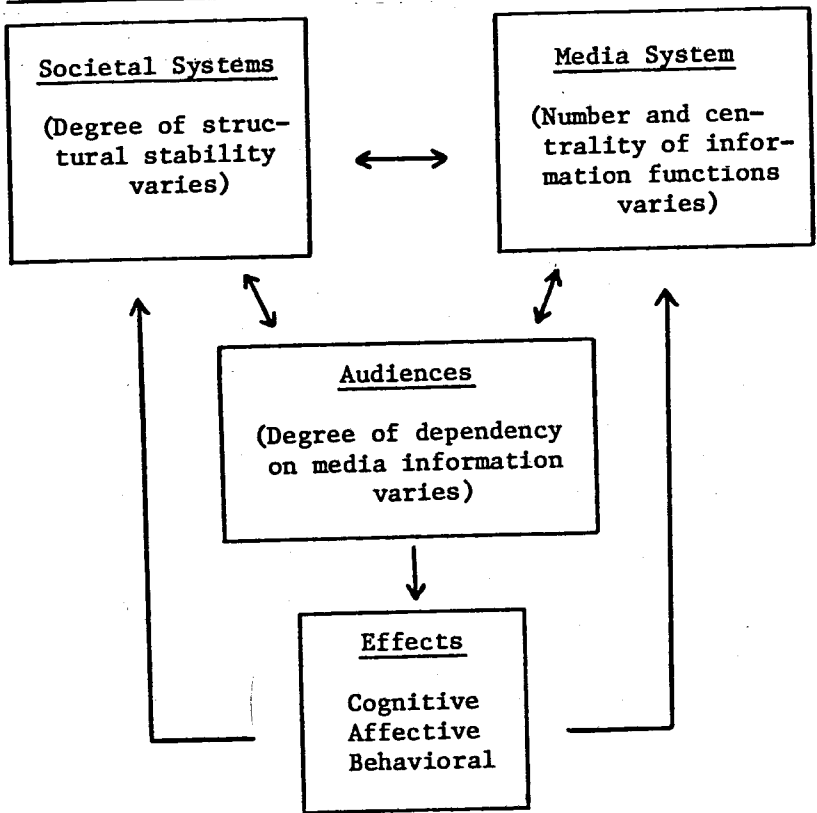

Figure 1: Society, Media, and Audience: Reciprocal Relationships

specific kinds of cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes in people that are regularly brought about by the mass media because of individual and societal dependence on their information resources.

COGNITIVE EFFECTS

The *creation and resolution of ambiguity* serves as the first example of a cognitive alteration effect which is particularly likely to receive the attention of investigators working from a dependency model. Ambiguity is a problem of either insufficient or conflicting information (Ball-Rokeach, 1973). Ambiguity can occur either because people lack enough information to understand the meaning of an event, or because they lack adequate information to determine which of several possible interpretations of an event is the correct one. Research evidence shows that when unexpected events occur, such as natural disasters or the assassination of a political leader, many people first become aware of such events through mass media information channels (e.g., Sheatsley and Feldman, 1969). When the initial information gathered and delivered by the media is incomplete, feelings of ambiguity are created whereby audience members know that an event has occurred, but do not know what it means or how to interpret it. More information will probably be sought in attempts to resolve such ambiguity. In many instances, the ambiguity resulting from incomplete or conflicting media reports is resolved by more complete information subsequently delivered by media to their audiences. In such cases, the media's role in ambiguity creation and resolution is relatively easy to see.

What is perhaps harder to see, but what may have greater sociopolitical significance, is the extent to which people are dependent on the media for continuous or ongoing ambiguity resolution. People living in times of rapid social change, who are in settings marked by relative instability or social conflict, or who are confronted with specific situations in which something unexpected has occurred, will often experience ambiguity. Such

ambiguity is usually stressful. Ambiguity can be resolved in a matter of seconds, or it can persist for days, months, or even years in the absence of adequate information.

When people become heavily dependent upon the mass media for the information they need to resolve ambiguity, the defining or structuring effect of mass-mediated information is considerable. The media do not have the power to determine uniformly the exact content of the interpretations or "definitions of the situation" that every person constructs. But, by controlling what information is and is not delivered and how that information is presented, the media can play a large role in limiting the range of interpretations that audiences are able to make.

Examination of the essential roles played by the media in periods of modernization suggests that the media clearly have such a role in the construction of social reality (Lerner, 1959, 1969). Persons living in societies undergoing change from traditional to industrial forms experience pervasive ambiguity. This ambiguity is particularly acute during the period between their psychological unhitching from traditional customs, values, and world views and their adoption of more modern versions. The utility of having relatively standardized information packaged and transmitted via media by those agencies seeking to promote and control the modernization process has long been recognized. Control over such media information delivery is essential precisely because of the need to control how people resolve ambiguity.

A second cognitive effect that can be particularly common when audiences rely heavily upon media information resources to keep up with their changing world is *attitude formation*. During any year or decade in recent history, numerous instances of media-initiated attitude formation can be found. Publics have formed new attitudes about such events as lower speed limits, environmental problems, energy crises, specific wars, and political corruption. New attitudes are continually being formed as various persons gain the public eye. In modern society there is a constant parade of new political figures, religious leaders,

sports personalities, scientists and artists. There is also a seemingly endless variety of social movements toward which orientations must be worked out. Even physical objects become the focus of attitude formation. These can include new household gadgets, clothing, birth control devices, car safety mechanisms, and innovations in communication technology. the media push a never-ending flow of such events, issues, objects and persons into public attention. People formulate their feelings toward them as they confront this flow.

We do not suggest that the media are monolithic in their influence on such attitudes. The selectivity processes emphasized in earlier perspectives undoubtedly play a role in the attitude formation process. Likewise, local community opinion leaders selectively channel people's attention to events and influence the content or intensity of the attitude formed. However, these psychological and social processes probably play more of a role in determining the specific content and intensity of the attitudes formed than they do in determining which events, people, or objects are likely to become candidates for attitude formation.

A third cognitive effect centers around the media's role in *agenda-setting*. Neither individuals themselves nor their opinion leaders control the selection activities of the media that sort among potential topics for presentation or among available sets of information about those topics. Moreover, even though the media deliver information on a broad range of topics, people have neither the time nor the energy to form attitudes and beliefs about everything. They must select some more limited set of topics and issues about which to concern themselves. It is out of this set of necessities that the effect of agenda-setting takes place.[3] We need to understand two major features of this process. First, why is there a considerable similarity in the agenda of concern regarding certain types of topics among members of the media audience? Second, in spite of such instances of similarity, why do members of the public who attend to the media show numerous differences in their personal agendas of concern regarding media-presented topics?

This seeming dilemma between tendencies toward both uniformity and differences in personal agendas can be resolved quite simply. To be certain, specific individuals will set their personal agendas in relation to their unique backgrounds of prior socialization, experience and personality structure. However, the society produces broad strata of people with sufficient uniformity of social circumstances that they share many problems and concerns in greater or lesser degree in spite of individual differences. In a society such as ours, for example, many people are wage-earners that have limited monetary resources to obtain their mass-produced necessities. In this sense they are alike regardless of their personality differences; they share a concern over such matters as rising prices, taxes, unemployment, and other economic matters that can quickly alter their standard of living. These override their individual differences. Thus, when the media present information of importance on economic matters, these topics can be expected to be placed high on their agendas of concern.

Where individual differences play an important role in agenda-setting is with respect to topics that are less tied to such social locations. Animal lovers of any social category because of their individual attitudes will be likely to attend to and respond strongly to media delivered stories of mistreatment. People of all walks of life who enjoy fishing are likely to include in their agendas new policies of the fish and game department.

Agenda setting, in other words, is brought about by an interactional process. Topics are filtered through media information-gathering and -processing systems and then selectively disseminated. The public then sorts out their interest and concern with this information as a function of both their individual differences in personal make-up and their location in societal strata and categories. Out of this system of variables and factors emerges a list of topics to which varying numbers of people give differential assignments of importance. That list constitutes the agenda of the media audience as a whole.

Still another cognitive effect that occurs in a media-dependent society is the *expansion of peoples' systems of beliefs*.

Charles H. Cooley (1909) long ago used the term "enlargement" to refer to the idea that people's knowledge and belief systems expand because they learn about other people, places, and things from the mass media. This idea can be more specifically explained by examining what Altman and Taylor (1973) call the "breadth" dimension of belief structure. Beliefs are organized into categories. These categories, such as those pertaining to religion, family, politics, and the like reflect the major areas of a person's social activity. The breadth dimension refers to the number of categories in a belief system and how many beliefs are found in each category. Belief systems can be broadened (enlarged) by increasing either the number of categories or the number of beliefs in a given category. For example, the vast amount of new information about ecological matters disseminated by the media in recent years has surely fostered the enlargement of people's beliefs about everything from automobiles to "baggies," from babies to compacters, an so on. These can be incorporated into existing opinions, attitudes and values concerning free enterprise, recreation, work, religion, and the family. By their constant surveillance and presentation of aspects of the changing social and physical world we live in, the media have the effect of broadening their audiences' belief categories and enlarging their belief systems.

The final cognitive effect that needs consideration is the media's impact on *values*. Values may be defined as very basic beliefs that people hold about either "desirable end states of existence" (e.g., salvation, equality, freedom) or "preferred modes of conduct" (e.g., honest, forgiving, capable). Only under rare conditions would we expect mass media information to be able single-handedly to alter such basic beliefs.[4] Mass mediated information can, however, play an important part in creating the conditions for *value clarification*. One way that the media facilitate value clarification is by presenting information that precipitates *value conflict* within audience members and between social groups. For example, the recent civil rights and ecology movements not only received broad media coverage, but also involved fundamental value conflicts. Civil rights

movements posed a conflict between individual freedom (e.g., property rights) and equality (e.g., human rights). Ecology movements bring economic values into conflict with aesthetic and survival values. Most people did not, however, have the interest, inclination, or information necessary to see these issues as value conflicts. Mass-mediated information, in the form of reports of statements made by movement leaders, or in the form of interpretations of the movement's motives and actions, usually includes identification of the underlying value conflicts. Once the value conflicts inherent in such movements are posed and clarified by the media, audience members are moved to articulate their own value positions. Such articulation can be painful because it can force a choice between mutually incompatible goals and the means for obtaining them. However, for action to take place choices must be made. In the process of trying to decide which is more important in a particular case, general value priorities become clarified. Thus, the media indirectly have had a cognitive impact on members of their audiences.

AFFECTIVE EFFECTS

The impact of media messages on an audience's feelings and emotional responses is one of the least explored kinds of effects. However, a limited body of writing on the matter makes some suggestions. It has been hypothesized that prolonged exposure to violent media content has a "numbing" or de-sensitization effect (e.g., Wertham, 1954). Some observers suggest that such effects may promote insensitivity or the lack of a desire to help others when violent encounters are witnessed in real life (e.g., Rosenthal, 1964). Along a similar line, Hyman (1973) has pointed out that social scientists have not paid attention to the effects of violent media content on audience sentiments. There is some evidence to suggest that the level of physiological arousal caused by exposure to audio-visual portrayals of violence does decline over time. But such evidence is no substitute for the kind of direct research on emotional responses that Hyman is calling for.

Fear, anxiety, and *trigger-happiness* are illustrations of affective effects that could be researched. For example, prolonged exposure to news messages or even TV dramas that portray cities as violence-ridden jungles may increase people's fear or anxiety about living in or even travelling to the city. In a state of anticipation of the worst, city residents or visitors may be emotionally triggered to respond violently to others' actions. These kinds of effects may be particularly likely for residents of non-metropolitan areas who depend largely on the media for information about what's going on in the cities, and who have little firsthand experience with city life.

Actually, almost all media effects could be examined in terms of their affective dimension. It is difficult to imagine the cognitive effect of attitude formation without accompanying affective effects. Sometimes the affective element of attitude formation can have serious social consequences. In periods of intense social conflict the police may form a number of attitudes from media characterizations about groups with which they have to deal. If media-derived attitudes contain affective elements, such as anger, hostility, and frustration, it may retard the ability of the police to keep their cool when the encounter actually comes. Exactly this pattern developed in 1968 in Chicago during the disruptions of the Democratic National Convention.

Morale and *alienation* serve as the final examples of the kinds of alterations in audience affect that can result from media messages. Klapp (1972) has proposed that in societies in which the mass media play central communications roles, the nature of media information has substantial effects on people's morale and level of alienation. The reason why can be found in the pioneering writings of Emile Durkheim (1951). The sense of collective well-being and "we feeling" that promotes morale and that combats alienation is a fragile product of successful social relations that cannot be developed or maintained without effective communication systems. A key element in that effective communication is the presence of regular and positive information about the groups and categories to which people

belong, such as their society, community, profession, or ethnic group. People who rely on mass media systems as a primary source of information about their groups and categories can, thus, experience changes in morale and level of alienation when there are notable changes in the quantity or quality of the information delivered by the media about those collectives. According to this line of reasoning, any number of groups including women, Blacks, Native Americans, or even Americans generally, would be expected to undergo increased or decreased morale and changes in level of alienation as the nature of media messages about them underwent change.

BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS

Overt action is, of course, the kind of effect that most people are interested in. Changes in attitude, belief and affective states are interesting, but it is the degree to which they influence overt action that makes them important. Of the numerous effects of media messages on behavior that could be considered, we have chosen to discuss *activation* and *de-activation*.[5]

Activation refers to instances in which audience members do something that they would not otherwise have done as a consequence of receiving media messages. As we have already suggested, activation may be the end product of elaborate cognitive or affective effects. For example, people may engage in *issue formation* or *issue resolution* as a consequence of attitudes they have formed and feelings they have developed. Take as an illustration people whose primary contact with the contemporary women's movement is via the media. They may initially react to movement leaders' allegations of "sexism" with ambiguity, perhaps not even knowing what the term means. The problem of resolving ambiguity and the stress that accompanies it gain a high place on their cognitive agenda. Resolution of ambiguity leads to the formation of new attitudes and feelings about sexual equality and the women's movement. The culmination of this chain of effects is a felt need to act. Once established, the need to act is transformed into overt action by

public expression of these new attitudes and feelings, thereby participating in issue formation. Subsequent media information, such as an announcement of a protest in support of a proposal made by a women' group, may further activate people to join the protest, while others may be activated to organize a counter protest. These overt actions become part of the issue resolution process.

Seymour-Ure (1974) notes the difference between primary effects on message receivers and secondary effects that occur because certain media messages are or are not transmitted. The *strategies of action* formulated by groups who are dependent upon media coverage to communicate their protest or point o view to the public and policy makers provide one example of what might be called a secondary activation effect. The yippies of the 1960's, for example, seemingly took cognizance of what kinds of protest activities were and were not covered by the media. They created an almost classical strategy of action to gain media coverage which included explicit appeals to such media news criteria as drama, simple symbols and slogans, motion, and potential conflict or violence.

So much attention has been given to the undesirable behavioral consequences of television content that it might be well to mention briefly one socially desirable behavioral effect. Stein and Friedrich's (1971) recent research suggests that TV viewers may be activated to engage in both prosocial and anti-social behavior. Subjects in their research who viewed a popular children's show (Mr. Rogers) increased their level of cooperative activity over several weeks of exposure. Those subjects exposed to violent content, on the other hand, increased their level of aggressive activity. Thus, the research showed that both cooperation and aggression may be activated, depending on the nature of the television message received.

Research conducted in the 1940s suggests that media messages may activate *altruistic* economic behavior. Merton (1946) examined how a radio marathon featuring a well-known singer of that era (Kate Smith) activated large numbers of people to buy war bonds.

In many instances, such as voting and consumption, deactivation or what people would have otherwise done, but which they *don't* do as a consequence of media messages can be as important as what they are activated to do. Yet deactivation effects have not received as much research attention. Not voting and not consuming provide two examples of the kinds of deactivation effects which could be examined. Most people are heavily dependent on the media for information about state and national political contests and about the state of the economy. Political campaigns have not only become longer and longer, but have also depended more and more on the media to communicate to voters. Such campaigns may not change many established attitudes toward the contestants. They might, however, elicit affective responses, such as overwhelming boredom, disgust, or cognitive assessments such as that it makes no difference who wins. These inner states can culminate in voting or deactivation of people's intention to vote.

Likewise, when media messages help to create an affective state of fear about one's own and the nation's economic future or the belief that a depression is unavoidable, people may not buy stocks, new cars, certain foods, or a multitude of other products that they would have otherwise bought. This would actually have the effect of deepening a recession by too much deactivation of a consumption behavior.

DISCUSSION

Persons as members of media audiences encounter media messages with both constructed social realities and considerable dependency on media information resources. The social realities people hold are the product of the processes by which the societal system enculturates and socializes persons and structures their social action. The dependencies people have on media information are a product of the nature of the sociocultural system, category membership, individual needs, and the number and centrality of the unique information

functions that the media system serves for individuals and for society.

When media messages are not linked to audience dependencies and when people's social realities are entirely adequate before and during message reception, media messages may have little or no alteration effects. They may reinforce existing beliefs or behavior forms. In contrast, when people do not have social realities that provide adequate frameworks for understanding, acting, and escaping, and when audiences are dependent in these ways on media information received, such messages may have a number of alteration effects. Media messages, in this instance, may be expected to alter audience behavior in terms of cognitive, affective, and/or overt activity. Thus, both the relative adequacy of the audience's social realities and the relative degree of audience dependency on media information resources must be taken into account to explain and predict the effects of media messages.

Finally, the effects of media messages flow back to influence people's needs or psychological and social characteristics. And, in some cases, they flow back to alter the nature of the societal system itself. Behavioral alteration effects, for example, in some instances may take the form of massive protest which not only gets people involved in producing a new series of events to be covered by the media, but may also increase the level of societal conflict, alter societal norms, or create new social groups. This series of events, in turn, can force changes in the nature of the relationships between the sociocultural system and the media system, such as the passing of new laws designed to change the media's operating policies.

The dependency model avoids a seemingly untenable all-or-none position of saying either that the media have no significant impact on people and society, or that the media have an unbounded capacity to manipulate people and society. It allows us to specify in a limited way when and why mass-communicated information should or should not have significant effects upon how audiences think, feel, and behave.

NOTES

1. These propositions can be accepted without reversion to a simplistic assumption of a mass society lacking meaningful group ties.

2. See C. Wright (1959; 1974) for a functional analysis of media information roles.

3. For a discussion of the various ways in which the term agenda-setting has been used, see J. McLeod et al. (1974).

4. For a thorough discussion of the values concept and the conditions under which values can be changed, see M. Rokeach (1973).

5. For an earlier discussion of activation effects, see O. Larsen (1964).

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